

Leatherneck: Magazine of the Marines

By Congressman Bruce Braley

My father's journey from the halls of Montezuma to the sands of Iwo Jima ended 65 years ago on 23 Feb. 1945 when the bow doors of LST 808 opened on Green Beach. It was D+4, the same day as the flag raisings on Mount Suribachi.

My father Byard Braley graduated from high school in Montezuma, Iowa, in 1943, and had to get my grandparents' permission to enlist in the Marine Corps when he was 17. He took the train from Iowa to Camp Pendleton, completed his basic training, and left San Diego on 28 July 1944, bound for Hawaii. He wound up at Camp Tarawa near Hilo on the Big Island, and was eventually assigned to the Headquarters and Service Battery, 4th 155mm Howitzer Battalion, which was commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Douglas E. Reeve as part of the Corps Artillery Group (commanded by Col John S. Letcher).

On 22 Jan. 1945, my father sailed from Hilo, stopping at Pearl Harbor, Eniwetok Atoll, and Guam before arriving at Iwo Jima on 23 February 1945. What was going through his 18-year-old mind when those bow doors opened on D+4? Was he on Green Beach when the first flag went up over Suribachi? My father died 29 years ago before I had a chance to ask these questions, but the photographs from that time and the official Marine Corps history fill in some of the story.

My father didn't know it at the time, but one of the first Marines to reach the summit of Mount Suribachi was Corporal Harold Keller from my hometown of Brooklyn, Iowa. Keller's heroism is documented in numerous books about Iwo Jima. He served with the 2d Raider Battalion in four prior engagements, and was wounded on Bougainville. Keller took the lead after reaching the summit and was the first to encounter and fire on Japanese resistance. He appears in the famous "Gung Ho" photo of the men who participated in the flag-raising assault.

This same photograph shows a line of LST's down below the summit. Photographs taken the next two days on Beach Green show LST 808 in this same area, along with the gun pits for the Corps' artillery's 155s. Both battalions of the Corps' 155s were in action by 25 February under Col Letcher. In his book, "One Marine's Story" (1970), Col Letcher describes his first night on

Iwo Jima at the Corps Artillery command post:

"I had been asleep for perhaps an hour when a shell burst which seemed to be right outside the tent. It was followed in rapid succession by others. *** The shells were bursting in the air a few feet above the ground and were spraying fragments in every direction. *** The command post area seemed to be their target and they were making a hit with every shell. Most of our personnel must have been poorly dug in just as I was because, mingled with the noise of the shell bursts, I heard screams and cries of wounded men. I was trembling uncontrollably and found myself reciting the Apostle's Creed."

Thirty-five men were killed or wounded that night in the command post of the Corps' artillery. I believe this incident had a profound and personal impact on my father. Long after he died, my brother, Brian, met a patient at the VA hospital where he works in Knoxville, Iowa. This veteran worked with my Dad after the war and described in detail an incident when my father had a flashback to an incident where one of his friends was obliterated by a direct hit from Japanese artillery.

In our family, we've always had great pride for my father's service and the courage he exhibited on the beaches of Iwo Jima. But for my father, and thousands more across America, the memories of Iwo Jima were dark, deep and enduring. In the words of Col Letcher, "few areas of land of similar size have ever been fought for more savagely or paid for more dearly with human life."

For many years, the kind of battle scars that plagued my father were difficult to diagnose and even harder to treat. He suffered from what we now know is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). To ensure today's veterans don't have to suffer in silence the way my father did, I'm introducing the Veterans Access to Care Act today, the 65 th Anniversary of my father's landing on Iwo Jima.

America's understanding of PTSD and its impact on our returning veterans has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. At the same time, the demand on America's VA facilities is reaching unparalleled levels.

The VA is facing an increased and unprecedented demand for medical services today as aging World War II, Korean War, and Vietnam War veterans require more medical care, and as thousands of veterans are returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan with severe physical and mental injuries.

Since 2001, the number of patients at America's VA facilities has increased nearly 30 percent. As of June 2009, the VA reported 480,000 veteran patients and 442,000 disability claims from

the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, including nearly 9,000 new patients per month as a result of these engagements.

Too frequently, I hear stories from veterans, especially in Iowa's small towns and rural communities, who have a hard time accessing the medical care they were promised. To create more incentive for these high quality health care providers to serve our nation's veterans, the Veterans Access to Care Act will classify all VA facilities and state Veterans Homes as Health Professional Shortage Areas, allowing them to compete for National Health Service Corps Fellowships.

The National Health Services Corps recruits well-qualified medical providers to serve where we need them most by utilizing scholarship and loan forgiveness programs. These programs provide service-obligated scholarships and loan forgiveness to health professional students in Health Professional Shortage Areas. For the first two years of the Loan Repayment Program, recipients get a total of \$50,000. For every subsequent two years (optional, not required), recipients can receive a total of \$35,000.

Today, one in four veterans has to wait a month or longer before receiving care at a VA facility. This is due, in part, to the fact that many VA facilities are having a difficult time recruiting well-qualified mental health professionals, doctors, dentists and nurses. My bill will encourage young health professionals to work with veterans by giving them financial incentives to do so.

My father and Harold Keller never considered themselves heroes. To them, the heroes were the Marines and Navy corpsmen who never came home from Iwo Jima. On this historic day, it is fitting to honor the sacrifices made by all of our men and women in uniform. I hope that my Veterans Access to Care Act will honor the service of my father by creating better access to care for our veterans in all parts of this great country.